DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 269 002 IR 012 091

AUTHOR Weber, Andrew M.
TITLE The Pros & Cons of Teaching/Learning by Television.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the Eastern Community College Social Sciences Association (Williamsburg, VA, March 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Policy; College Faculty; *Distance Education; *Educational Television; Higher Education; Incentives; Information Dissemination; *Teaching Methods; Technological Advancement; *Telecourses; Television Teachers

ABSTRACT

Learning by television is not a new phenomenon and, as an educational medium, it has gone through some severe growing pains. Unfortunately, while advances in technologies (cable, home recorders, satellites, teleconferencing) have contributed to an increase in the number of telecourses since the mid-1970s, faculty are often unprepared to teach these courses, and the institutions involved may be inadequate or unwilling to support their efforts. The use of telecourses to present instruction has many advantages and disadvantages. The strengths of telecourses include: (1) provision of broader student accessibility to educational opportunities; (2) potential for attracting additional students and income for participating institutions; (3) possible award by cable companies of a public or educational access channel, which permits greater exposure to the telecourses available; (4) copies of taped materials can be made available to students for review; and (5) more information can be disseminated to students in less time via telecourses than in regular classes. The weaknesses include: (1) lack of continuing contact and interaction between the instructor and the student; (2) the facilitation of student drop-out; (3) some courses are technically aesthetic but lacking in substance; (4) little or no opportunity for questions and feedback; (5) textbooks are often not written for the telecourse; (6) students who register late may not receive course information on time; and (7) problems with scheduling examinations. It is recommended that institutions treat telecourses as viable alternatives to the traditional classroom situation, and that they initiate or modify certain important practices to ensure the success of such courses. (JB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED269002

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OERI
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
[X] This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
[ ] Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official position or policy.

THE PROS & CONS OF TEACHING/LEARNING BY TELEVISION

Presented by Andrew M. Weber
March 1984
ECCSSA Meeting
Williamsburg, Virginia

IR012091

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Andrew N. Weber
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Learning by television is not a new phenomenon. A quarter of a century ago programs such as Sunrise Semester began to offer an array of courses on both the high school and college levels. However, it was simply a matter of time before television would have an important impact on college level education. As in the private and public sectors, television, as an educational medium has gone through some severe growing pains and will probably continue to do so for years to come. College credit by television has not only become an educational concern for faculty members and students but in many colleges and universities an organizational issue as well.

Since the mid-1970's, the number of telecourses has proliferated as has the number of students enrolled in them. Although the advances in technologies (cable, home recorders, satellites, teleconferencing, etc.) have contributed to these increases, the lack of preparation of faculty to teach these courses, and more importantly, the inadequacy or unwillingness of the institutions involved to support the teaching faculty have made teaching by television analogous to building a modern skyscraper with stone-age tools.

There is no doubt in my mind that using telecourses as a viable means of instruction has many advantages and potential advantages. However, unless faculty members are prepared to deal with the new technology and the institution is willing to support them, teaching by television will not achieve its potential. With this in mind, I would like to briefly discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning by telecourses.

STRENGTHS

In a society that values Democratic education, television gives the public broader accessibility to education. Many students who have unusual work schedules, handicaps, lack of adequate transportation, who are late registrants or who find themselves closed out of regularly scheduled classes, are able to enroll in telecourses to fulfill their curricula requirements.

Institutionally, telecourses have the potential of attracting large numbers of full-time equivalent students, and from a business point of view, these students represent additional income for the participating institutions, income that may have not been otherwise generated. As mentioned above, many of these students would not have enrolled at all if not for the telecourse option. College-wide enrollment for telecourses may vary from less than one hundred in institutions in smaller communities to several thousand in large metropolitan areas. If those in charge of telecourses realized this source of potential income, their efforts to improve support for faculty and hence the quality of instruction would (or could) serve to attract even more students.

With the spread of local cable companies, many colleges and universities are given a public or educational access channel. This permits a greater exposure to the telecourses available. The participating institution has the ability, therefore, to show the courses several days per week as well as rotating the times which they are shown. This flexibility in scheduling does not restrict the student to viewing the lessons at certain times or days. It also

permits the student the opportunity to review each lesson at least one additional time.

Another advantage telecourses offer is that many college libraries or Learning Resource Centers have copies of the programs for student use if the student misses a particular program or simply wants more review time. Similarly, new technologies such as home video-recording devices permit the student to tape programs for viewing or reviewing at their convenience.

Finally, telecourses, despite their usual thirty-minute format, permit large amounts of information to be disseminated to the students. Normal classroom disruptions, such as taking attendance, questions, classroom discussions often going off on tangents, and disruptions caused by late arriving students or early departing ones, do not occur with telecourses. It is, therefore, possible to present more material in one thirty-minute T.V. lesson than in a one-hour or seventy-five minute class.

WEAKNESSES

Perhaps the most obvious weakness of telecourses is the lack of continuing contact and interaction between the instructor and student. Telecourse students are, for the most part, phantoms or unknown entities to their instructors. It becomes difficult to know students individually and consequently helping them deal with or overcome their problems (some of which may affect their performance on exams or other written assignments) becomes virtually impossible. In a traditional classroom setting, the instructor has a greater opportunity to deal with students on a one-to-one basis. As a result of this, he may

become aware that a particular student has either a learning problem, family problems, job stress, transportation difficulties, or was ill advised with regard to scheduling.

Another problem with teaching by telecourses is that it is easy for students to become frustrated and disappear from the course. This frustration is usually the result of several factors. First, the quantity of the workload may be too much for certain students, while with others it may not be challenging enough. Secondly, if a student does poorly on an exam he may simply give up and "throw in the towel," especially if student-instructor communication isn't maintained. If a student doesn't communicate with the instructor, the instructor will be unaware of whether the student is still actively pursuing the course material. Often the instructor is unware of the student's attendance status until the first scheduled exam has been completed. As a result, on many campuses the attrition rate for telecourses may run as high as fifty percent. One (telecourse) instructor at a community college in New Jersey reported to me that in his course this rate was approaching eighty percent. However, another instructor, at the same school, who kept in close contact with her students via phone and mail, reported only a twenty percent attrition rate. These large differences may be due, however, to the nature of the course material. The instructor with the high dropout rate was "teaching" General Sociology while the other was teaching a course in composition, Thus requiring many more written assignments. It is difficult to anticipate which students are having trouble with the material or the method of presentation if close contact is

not maintained. This too may not be discovered until well into the semester. If the problems that telecourses present continually frustrate or alienate students, the courses will lose their attractiveness and enrollment will decline. However, if these problems are eliminated enrollment in telecourses will grow.

Perhaps one of the most serious weaknesses relating to learning by television is that there is no easy way to solve content oriented problems. In a traditional classroom setting, there is always, or at least in most cases, an opportunity for students to ask questions and receive immediate feedback with regards to questionable material or missed information. With telecourses, this opportunity is not always available. Questions are often not immediately answered, if answered at all. Programs are televised either very early in the morning, late at night, or on weekends. During these times, faculty responsible for teaching those telecourses are usually unavailable to the student. Consequently, many questions are forgotten. This lack of immediacy of feedback puts an extra burden on the student and impedes the learning process. Interestingly, when questions are asked by students, the majority of questions are focused on procedural problems (e.g., How many questions on the test?), rather than content ones.

The textbooks used, for the most part, are not written for the telecourse. They are usually standard texts and although well written, are not designed to follow each program. As a result, reading assignments are often disjointed. For example, T.V. lesson one may correspond to chapter three then skip to pages 419-433 then back to

chapter three. In some instances, as much as one-third of the text is inappropriate or unused. Instead of the text being written specifically for the programs, it is chosen on the basis of how closely the subject matter relates to the telecourse programs. Consequently, in some cases, the language of the book and that used in the T.V lesson are different, causing confusion for many students.

Many instructors have reported that the T.V. programs are, at best, superficial. The "meat" of the material is left to the reading. If this is the case, telecourses are not much of an improvement over the once popular correspondence courses. Then an issue arises. Why have telecourses at all? Many programs are technically aesthetic, but lacking in substance. Family Portrait, which illustrates this point, is offered for three credits in the Sociology of Marriage and the Family when, in reality, it is more of a course in Home Economics, Human sexuality, Family Planning and Child Psychology. I am not condemning this course, merely asking the question, shouldn't a college level course in Sociology focus more on empirical theory or research?

Another problem is the late registration of students. Some schools permit registration in telecourses up to the third week of class. Oftentimes, the instructor is not given up-to-date enrollment information, and the late registrants fail to get their syllabi, reading assignments, or texts on time. Also, these same students may have missed several programs and are unable to view the missed material.

The scheduling of examinations poses another problem with telecourses. In some instances, exams are scheduled

for weekends - either Friday evenings or Saturday mornings. Other instructors (myself included) give the students a block of days - Monday through Saturday to take the exams. For the most part, exams have to be scheduled to meet the student's needs. Some students, due to physical disabilities or their inability to get to the test site, must have their exams mailed to them. In cases like this, special arrangements have to be made for proctoring those exams. In any case, whether exams are on weekends, over the course of a week, or sent to the student's home, the results are usually delayed in reaching the student. Reviewing the exam is extremely difficult, if possible at all. Although all of the above reflects flexibility, there are still problems with scheduling.

In many schools, an attempt has been made to include voluntary discussion and review classes as part of the course's requirements. In a survey I conducted relating to this issue, I discovered that between two-thirds and three-quarters of the instructors reported scanty attendance at these sessions. When the students were asked why they didn't attend, they gave the expected responses: "I had to work," "I couldn't find transportation," "I had tickets for the ballgame," and "The reason I took this course was so I didn't have to come to campus too much." Consequently, many instructors have done away with these discussion or review sessions.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE LEARNING BY TELECOURSES?

Telecourses should be treated, by the institutions using them, as a viable alternative to the traditional classroom situation. Presently, many institutions are offering

telecourses as a means of enticing students who would not otherwise attend their colleges. However, if telecourses are to be successful, some very important practices must be initiated or modified by those same institutions.

First, instructors who teach telecourses should have them included as part of their teaching load. This would afford them the time to keep in touch with their students, thus reducing the students' anxiety or alienation. Secondly, the institutions should give teaching faculty all the support possible. Secretarial services, which all telecourse instructors can rely on for exams, letters, and answering procedural questions, could be formed to lighten the load of the instructor and insure that someone is available to respond to phone calls during the days, evenings or weekends the courses are shown. Message could then be relayed to the instructor as soon as he resumes scheduled hours. Thirdly, instructors could also require students to report by phone at least once a week if just for the instructor to ascertain that the student is still enrolled. Those students who don't report will then be called by the instructor who will inquire into the student's intent. By doing this, any problem can be discovered and, possibly, solved before the student becomes frustrated and resigns himself to failure.

Finally, the sponsoring institution should initiate an orientation program solely aimed at T.V. students. At this time, the student is given an overview of learning by television, its pros and cons, as well as what they can do to increase their chances for success. At this session, the instructor can meet with his students, learn something about

them, acquaint them with the course procedures and reduce some of their uncertainties.

Learning by television is a unique educational experience, an experience that is very different from the traditional classroom environment. Most students who enroll in telecourses do not realize this. Consequently, they believe that successful completion of the course material will be simpler than a disciplined classroom setting. For some, it very well may be, but for most, however, it is more difficult. An early introduction to how and why learning by television is different and that there is a greater responsibility placed on the student must be made clear at these orientation sessions.

Credit by television is here to stay, and like any new method of instruction, mistakes will be made. However, if success is to be achieved, we must not only learn from our past errors but continue to work to anticipate and subsequently deal with as many future problems as possible. If telecourses are to survive, the benefits will have to significantly outweigh the problems.